

**SUNDAY AT LUCKY PLAZA:  
EMERGING IDENTITIES OF FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS  
(THE CASE OF INDONESIAN AND PHILIPPINES IN SINGAPORE)**

**THESIS**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for M.A. degree  
Study Program Cultural Studies**



**By**

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**GRADUATE SCHOOL  
UNIVERSITAS SEBELAS MARET  
SURAKARTA**

**2018**

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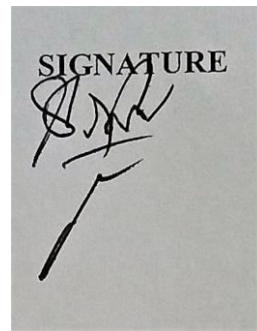
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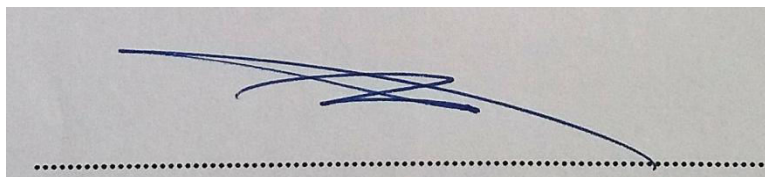
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**LEGITIMATION**

**SUNDAY AT LUCKY PLAZA:  
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**By**

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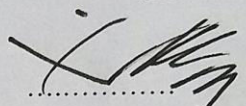
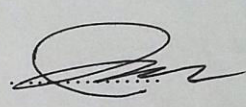
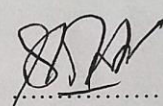
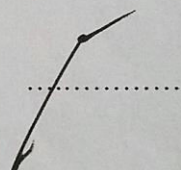
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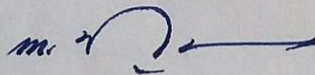
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## PRONOUNCEMENT

I hereby assert that:

1. The enclosed manuscript of Master thesis entitled **“Sunday at Lucky Plaza: emerging identities of Foreign Domestic Workers (Case of Indonesian and Philippines in Singapore)”** has been independently developed and authored by myself. I, further, declare that I have not used sources or means without declaration in the text using the referred sources and support. Any thoughts from others or literal quotations are clearly marked within the text and in the list of cited sources accordingly. If elements of plagiarism are proven to be evident in this manuscript, I accept the sanctions, both to the Thesis and my Master's Degree, as stated by the legislation in force.

2. Partial or entire publication of the content of this Thesis in scientific journals or forums shall include as authors the team of supervisors and the Postgraduate School of Universitas Sebelas Maret as its institution. By violating the provisions of this publication, I agree for the required academic sanctions to be enforced.

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Lydia Kanelli Kyvelou Kokkaliari. NIM:S701608007. **Sunday at Lucky Plaza: Emerging Identities of Foreign Domestic Workers (The Case of Indonesian and Philippines in Singapore).** Supervisor I: Dra. Sri Kusumo Habsari, M.Hum., Ph.D., II: Prof. Drs. Mugijatna, M.Si., Ph.D.. Graduate School- Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta

## **ABSTRACT**

Leisure is gaining in significance as a factor of performing one's identity. The choices and practices of leisure provide insights of both 'what one does' and 'who one is'. In a cultural studies perspective, this thesis explores the ways in which the intimate and foreign mobile subjectivities inform and stimulate new forms of identities within the realm of leisure choices, drawing from self-narratives of foreign domestic workers (FDW) in Singapore. The main questions are: (1) in which way are the identities of FDW from Indonesia and the Philippines constructed, transformed, and negotiated within the realm of leisure, and (2) which identity formations prevail in correlation to cultural capital, regarded through their choice of spending their rest day at the Lucky Plaza shopping mall. Thesis relies on the spoken word of active agents, focusing on the FDW imagination told through their own stories. It elaborates on five theoretical notions: (1) cultural capital, (2) identity, (3) cultural identity, (4) leisure, and (5) heterotopias. Research focuses on the new transmigrant identities and the subsequent positions they occupy. Primary data is collected through in-depth interviews with five informant and direct observation at Lucky Plaza.

Research shows that a new identity of the FDW from Indonesia and the Philippines in Singapore has emerged in the aftermath of their recent acquisitions: a rest day right and negotiation of minimum wages. Furthermore, the 'habitus' within which their cultural identities are negotiated is influenced and informed by the cross-bordering processes. Pragmatically speaking, Lucky Plaza has become an alternative venue where FDW are able to be agents for themselves to their own right, thus localizing their agency and cultural identity in heterotopian settings. By inhabiting spaces such as Lucky Plaza, they create their own migration-specific social field, creating networks and both intra- and supra- national alliances. Their similar life chances produce their fragmented and hybrid cultural identities enforcing a distinct sense of self and belonging.

Key words: Female domestic workers, Cultural identity, Cultural capital, Leisure, Heterotopias, Singapore

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### ABSTRAK

*Leisure* telah menjadi salah satu faktor penting untuk membangun dan mempertunjukkan identitas. Pilihan dan praktik rekreasi memberi wawasan tentang 'apa seorang lakukan' dan 'siapa seorang ini'. Dalam perspektif kajian budaya, tesis ini membahas cara dengan subjektivitas *mobile* yang intim dan asing menginformasikan dan merangsang bentuk-bentuk identitas baru di dalam wilayah pilihan rekreasi, yang diambil langsung dari narasi asisten rumah tangga asing (AART) di Singapura. Pertanyaan utama adalah: (1) bagaimana identitas AART dikonstruksi, ditransformasi, dan dinegosiasi di komunitas penerima dalam kegiatan rekreasi pada waktu luang (*leisure*) mereka sebagai proses pembuatan makna, serta (2) formasi identitas apa saja yang memuculkan dan berkorelasi dengan modal budaya mereka, terlihat oleh pilihan kegiatan rekreasi (menyenangkan) mereka mengumpulkan di Lucky Plaza. Tesis berdasarkan atas cerita agen aktif diucapkan, memusatkan perhatian pada imajinasi AART yang ditemukan melalui cerita mereka sendiri. Ini menguraikan lima konsep teoritis: (1) modal budaya, (2) identitas, (3) identitas budaya, (4) *leisure*, dan (5) *heterotopia*.

Penelitian ini berfokus pada identitas transmigran baru dan posisi identitas yang mereka hadapi. Data primer dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan lima informan serta observasi langsung di Lucky Plaza. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa identitas baru AART dari Indonesia dan Filipina di Singapura telah muncul setelah akuisisi mereka baru-baru: sehari seminggu istirahat dan upah minimum. '*Habitus*' yang mana identitas budaya mereka dinegosiasikan dipengaruhi dan diinformasikan oleh proses lintas-perbatasan. Berbicara secara pragmatik, Lucky Plaza telah menjadi tempat alternatif di mana AART dapat menjadi agen bagi diri mereka sendiri, sehingga melokalkan agensi dan identitas budaya mereka di lingkungan *heterotopian*. Dengan menghuni tempat-tempat seperti Lucky Plaza, mereka menciptakan ranah sosial khusus migrasi mereka, menciptakan jaringan dan aliansi intra dan supra-nasional. Kesempatan hidup mereka yang serupa menghasilkan identitas budaya mereka yang terfragmentasi dan hibrida yang memaksakan rasa diri dan rasa memiliki mereka yang berbeda.

Kata Kunci: Asisten Rumah Tangga Asing, Identitas Budaya, Modal Budaya, *Leisure*, *Heterotopia*, Singapura

## **MOTTO**

*anticipated*



## DEDICATION

To all the women that helped me,  
Fed me,  
Taught me,  
And especially to those  
who participated in this research

*Στη Στέλλα και στη Γιάσμη*

## ACNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Dra. Sri Kusumo Habsari, M.Hum, Ph.D of the Postgraduate School at Universitas Sebelas Maret. She has always been accepting to my concerns and thoughts and she was available in more than duties entail. Her guidance, depth of knowledge and constructive criticism opened up new routes for this journey with this thesis (one of) its final destination(s).

I would also like to acknowledge Prof. Dr. Mugijatna, M.Si. Ph.D, of the Postgraduate School at Universitas Sebelas Maret as the second reader of this thesis, and I am gratefully indebted to his for his very valuable comments on this thesis.

I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee: Dr. Titis Pitana Srimuda, S.T., M.Trop.Arch., and Dr. Dwi Susanto, S.S., M.Hum., for their encouragement, insightful comments, and hard questions which led me to further explore my understanding and the process of writing this thesis.

Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to my family(ies), both generational and conjugal, for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement throughout my years of study and through the process of researching and writing this thesis. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them.

Thank you.

Lydia Kanelli Kyvelou Kokkaliari

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background

Recent times have witnessed the loosening of class distinctions (Bell and Hollows, 2006). Identities, then, no longer governed by production logics shifted to a paradigm of consumption practices (Shields, 1992) sutured into lifestyles. According to Giddens (1991:81), these social (cultural) practices became “decisions not only about how to act but who to be”. Leisure is gaining in significance as a factor of performing one’s identity. Thus, the leisure choices and practices provide insights of both ‘what one does’ and ‘who one is’. Accessibility, deprivation and participation to leisure venues and activities can reinforce discrimination and segregation of individuals and groups. In that light, leisure choices also illustrate this intersectional exclusion which is understood as “the amplification and deepening of exclusion of individuals who belong to more than one marginalized category” (Horolets, 2012: 3). This case study focuses on the leisure choices of foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines in Singapore as meaning-making and identity (per)forming processes. It illuminates leisure venues and choices as (heterotopic) spaces of contestation of their marginalized positions where foreign domestic workers develop their own strategies of inclusion and participation and an imagined sense of belonging.

In a cultural studies perspective, this thesis draws from self-narratives of foreign domestic workers from the archipelagos residing in Singapore. It explores the ways in which their intimate and foreign mobile subjectivities inform and stimulate new forms of identities within the realm of leisure choices. According to Bourdieu (1986) the “social world is accumulated history” and the notion of capital should be reintroduced in the pursuit of meticulously systematized analytic categories. Furthermore, it is employed to emphasize the limitations in the range of possible choices conducted in the social sphere and the conditioning of agents in respect to these choices. These may be economic, social and/ or cultural. Here, we illuminate the application and development of migration-specific cultural capital exercised by transient migrant workers in Singapore. This paper employs the notion of embodied cultural capital which comprises the knowledge that is consciously acquired and passively inherited, through the process of socialization within a culture and tradition. This type of

cultural capital can't be transmitted, but it is impressed upon the person's social field and sets of dispositions, thus, influencing both the person's taste and specifying the person's choices.

This thesis relies on the spoken word (self-narrative) of active agents, focusing on the lives of foreign domestic workers as told through their own stories. The 'real life question' of mobilities as a way of being in the world is looked through the paradigms prevailing by the told stories of these women, being practiced, embodied, experienced and represented in a variety of ways (Cresswell, 2010). These stories reveal foreign domestic workers (self)perspective on their lived migratory experiences as they evaluate ambiguous, and occasionally conflicting, narratives and stances in an attempt to integrate them within a single imagined identity, individually (self-identity) and collectively (cultural identity). In this view, this paper elaborates on five theoretical notions: (1) (migration-specific) cultural capital, (2) identity, (3) cultural identity, (4) leisure, and (5) heterotopia (as space).

During migration processes, practices from the home country are re-presented (*Darstellen*) in the events of the present in the host community. Hence, they are set against a different set of codes and entail different social and cultural values which are made into new entities; the 'newly-emergent realities' (Clair et.al, 2008). In other words, migration reinforces cultural change whereby some past cultural practices are modified, revised, reinvented and embedded within the present conditions of the transmigrant. The transmigrant herself moves in spaces encompassing the here and there, the home and away within time frames of always 'emerging-present' when present is embedded in the past and the future, similarly, embedded in the present (Claire et.al., 2008). As such, their cultural capital is 'situationally determined' (Werbner, 2004) manifested through identity making choices of leisure venues and activities. This identity formation coincides with the Bourdieusian (1984) idea of the liminality of human agency which is socially and culturally predetermined and (in)forms part(ly) of the person's habitus and social field.

International migration is a global phenomenon that is growing in scope, complexity and impact. According to the United Nations Population Division migration is "both a cause and effect of broader development processes and an intrinsic feature of our ever globalizing world" (UNDESA). Research has shown that migrants are forging and sustaining multistranded social relations that link their societies of origin and settlement. This immigration experience is called "transnationalism" in



order to emphasize the emergence of a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants are understood to be transmigrants when they develop and maintain multiple relations- familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political- that span borders. When immigrants engage in transnational activities, they create “social fields” that link their original country with their new country or countries of residence. These social fields are simultaneously informing and being informed from the transmigrant's cultural capital.

Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital formulates a world which isn't a placeless construction. On the contrary he insists on pointing out the material limitations of every structure, i.e. social structures. He negates the idea of an

[...] imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties, in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one, [...] and every prize can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, so that at each moment anyone can become anything.

Hence he reintroduces the notion of capital as “accumulated labor”, baring it from its economism and thus restoring a social world synonymous to accumulated history, which is subsequently employed to the notions of *habitus* and *social field*. Two important points emerge from this discussion: (a) human practice is an embodiment of a sociopolitical and cosmological order and/or disorder, and (b) choices are multivalent and ambiguous, so every action is the product of its own cultural *milieu*. In that sense, this thesis illustrates the transnational identities of foreign domestic workers as they exercise their agency through the leisure choices and cultural practices they (per)form at Lucky Plaza (with)in the *milieu* of globalization. Transnational has lead to a rethinking of citizenship. Differentiated forms of state membership may be needed to recognize the different types of relationships transmigrants have with different states - such as political rights in one place, economic rights in another and cultural rights in a third (Baubock, 1994; Baubock and Rundell, 1998). In practice, this happens when immigration states create forms of ‘quasi-citizenship’ or ‘denizenship’ (Hammar, 1990) by granting rights with regard to residency, employment or welfare to immigrant workers.

Indonesia and the Philippines have been categorized as one of the biggest sending countries in Asia alongside Sri Lanka (Hugo 2009). Admittedly, individuals from Indonesia and the Philippines who reside in Singapore have initially a different cultural capital, as its production relates to the conditions of reproduction of the social field which is distinct in the two Southeast Asian states. Yet, in this thesis their cultural similarities and their shared leisure venue, as well as the divergence from the social field of the host community, namely Singapore, enables to examine the constitution of their migration-specific cultural capital within the habitus produced in the heterotopic space of Lucky Plaza. Thus, the formulation of their migration-specific cultural capital in Lucky Plaza and the process through which this new cultural capital and space informs their emerging transnational identities are the focus of this study. Every year, hundred thousands of Indonesians flow overseas. Massive flow has shaped the feature of emigration in the last 15 years. Compared to 1994, the 2012 figures show more than 300 percent increase: the magnitude of which is extremely difficult to manage (Bastide, 2014). In terms of stock, moderate figures of Indonesian overseas workers amount to four to six million people (an estimate).

Taking initiative, the Philippines has been a strong advocate for its overseas workers, negotiating 12 bilateral labor agreements with receiving countries, many of which include strict regulation of private recruitment practices and fees. Despite concerted efforts, the government has not been able to sign agreements with the main countries of destination for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) such as Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Japan (Siebel, 2014). Singapore represents a qualitatively different conceptualization of modernity and social field for the foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines in comparison to both of their respective countries of origin. Thus, foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines residing in Singapore are treated as an entity since they conform to the following similarities: (a) migration and occupation field, (b) region of origin and level of development, (c) cultural feature, i.e. strong economic role of women, and (d) shared leisure venue, Lucky Plaza.

Over the last decade or two, in tandem with the quickening pace of global restructuring and widening reach of transnational connectivities, the bounded-ness of social life has been increasingly challenged in many ways. With the increased scholarly attention to transnational commodity flows, the de- and re-territorialisation of identities, engagements with margins, borders, contact zones and in-between space, and

proliferation of mobile subjectivities, a growing number of articles have been produced interrogating the linkages and intersections among gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, place, mobility, migration and transnationalism. By giving weight to multiplicity, diversity, fluidity and performativity as opposed to stability, stasis and fixity, the post-structuralist framing of 'gender in motion' engages with the new 'mobilities paradigm' (Yeoh and Ramdas, 2014: 1205).

Leisure, as time and as activity, isn't something that became apparent through the process of industrialization in the modern era. Nevertheless, it is a concept historically constructed. Clastres (2010:250) claims that preliterate societies are "leisure societies in light of the small amount of time devoted to production". Work was, then, the labor required to maintain the needs of the community and not an activity whose products were exchanged, marketed, accumulated. Thus, during industrialization and modernization, communities shifted, in terms of their time trajectories, from societies where leisure was a central part of the daily lives to economically-oriented societies. Under that light, leisure time and leisure activities aren't synonymous, yet leisure informs the roles and positions of every person in ways other than an individual as an economic unit which neoliberalism and economism have set forth.

In the case of the live-in foreign domestic workers the right to rest days/ free time has placed them (with)in the host societies in radically new ways. The leisure, as time and as activity, constitutes a shift from the notion of a separated individual working in/ for a specific location to the various meeting points of a community of women transmigrant workers who choose the activities, spaces and time schedules of their (own) liking. To have the right to work and/ or to rest is of significant importance as a choice that influences the prospects and the current living conditions of transmigrants. This thesis contends that leisure time as a right of transmigrant workers enables them to move from being restricted to 'working' as a condition of living to becoming apparent members of their host communities as actors making choices and as separate socio-cultural communities within their new surroundings. Here, Lucky Plaza is the setting where foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines exercise their agency. Migrant domestic workers' membership and belonging in Lucky Plaza's heterotopia is a constitutive aspect of their fragmented and transnational identity as it allows foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines to imagine themselves at home.. Lucky Plaza's heterotopia is localized within the center/ periphery dynamics of the Singaporean post-industrial *milieu*. Thus, discussed, here are

the strategies employed to (re)construct their identities through (dis)identification and the positionality of their emerging identities in the globalized urban society of Singapore.

## **B. Research Questions**

1. How do the identities of foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines in Singapore are constructed, transformed, and negotiated within the realm of leisure as meaning making process?
2. Which identity formations prevail in correlation to cultural capital, regarded through their choice of spending their rest day at Lucky Plaza?

## **C. Thesis Objectives**

This Thesis intends to:

1. Elaborate on the process through which the identities of foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines in Singapore are constructed, transformed, and negotiated within the realm of leisure as meaning making process;
2. Expatiate the identity formations which prevail in correlation to cultural capital, regarded through their choice of spending their rest day at Lucky Plaza.

## **D. Significance of Research**

Potential contributions of this thesis refer to two different dimensions: theoretical and practical.

- 1) Theory and Methods:
  - a) This research aims to enhance the theoretical concepts in the academic field of international migration by focusing on the cultural perspectives and implications of such mobilities. In other words, the emphasis is placed on the ways the active subjects of this research position themselves (with)in the power struggles and the strategies of resistance and (re) negotiation they employ in such settings. Thus, it contributes to the new mobilities paradigm of ‘gender in motion’.
  - b) This thesis employs the notion of migration-specific cultural capital to further its conceptualization within the context of the international migration flows and transmigrant activities in heterotopic leisure spaces.

2) Practical:

- a) The outcome of this research anticipates to inform the ways we view membership and citizenship in the growing cosmopolitan transnational global communities.
- b) Rendering visible the gendered underpinnings of flows, circulations and movements that constitute the lived worlds of men and women, this thesis hopes to contribute to a more accurate planning and implementation of policies for (and possibly in the future, by) the subjects of the research themselves.